NAXOS
A Guided Tour of
The Romantic Era
Volume 10

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BRAHMS, JOHANNES (1833–1897)

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BORODIN, ALEXANDER (1833–1887)

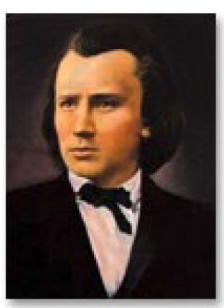
Borodin was born in 1833, the illegitimate son of a Georgian prince. His mother later married a retired army doctor and he was brought up at home in cultured surroundings, allowing him to develop his early interests in music in the course of a general education. His public career was as a professor of chemistry; in common with a number of contemporaries, he was only able to indulge his interest in music in his spare time, a fact that delayed his progress and left, at his death in 1886, a number of incomplete projects, later assembled and finished by his friend Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) and Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936).

In Russia, the nineteenth century saw an intellectual reaction to the westernizing tendencies initiated by Peter the Great a century before, and a move towards the creation of something specifically Russian. In music, opinions were divided between a group of nationalist composers, the so-called 'Five', led by Mily Balakirev (1837–1910), who had enjoyed a measure of professional training, and included Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Cesar Cui (1835–1918) and Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881). These nationalist composers gloried in their own relative amateurism, opposing strongly the establishment of professional conservatories in St. Petersburg and Moscow by the Rubinstein brothers, whom they regarded as representative of 'German' music.

OPERA (Track 1)
Borodin wrote several operas, but by far his most famous is the epic historical drama *Prince Igor*, set in twelfth-century Russia. It was completed by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov, and includes the well-known 'Polovtsian Dances' (choral dances with which the captive Prince is entertained by the Polovtsian Khan Konchak).

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC (Tracks 2-4)
The best-known example of Borodin's orchestral music is the musical picture *In the Steppes of Central Asia,* a vivid evocation of an exotic region. The second of his three symphonies occupied him intermittently for seven years; it is an attractive and very Russian work, which, along with Symphony No. 1 and the unfinished Third Symphony, forms an important addition to nationalist symphonic repertoire.

CHAMBER MUSIC (Track 5)
Chamber music represents a relatively large proportion of Borodin's oeuvre. His proposed composition of string quartets excited the suspicions of fellow nationalists, who sensed a surrender to what they regarded as foreign, German techniques. The two string quartets that he completed, however, were firmly Russian in inspiration. Other chamber music includes a Piano Quintet, a String Quintet and a Cello Sonata that is based on a theme from J.S. Bach's Sonata in G minor, BWV 1001.



BRAHMS, JOHANNES (1833–1897)

Brahms was born in Hamburg in 1833, the son of a double-bass player and a seamstress. His childhood was spent in relative poverty and he helped his family by playing the piano in dockside taverns. His early talent as a pianist led to talk of him as a child prodigy, and Eduard Marxsen (1806–1887) taught him the technical basis of composition. In 1851 Brahms met the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi (1828–1898), who introduced him to Hungarian dance music, which would later come to have an influence on his work. Two years later they set out on a concert tour. In Weimar they met Liszt, but Brahms failed to impress the Master. Later he was introduced to Schumann, who detected the promise of greatness in his work. After Schumann's death Brahms maintained a long friendship with his widow, the pianist and composer Clara Schumann, whose advice he always valued. Brahms eventually settled in Vienna, where to some he seemed the awaited successor to Beethoven. His blend of Classical form with a Romantic harmonic idiom made him the champion of those opposed to the musical innovations of Wagner and Liszt. He died in Vienna on 3 April 1897.

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC (Tracks 6-12)
Brahms wrote four symphonies, massive in structure, and all the result of long periods of work and revision. The two early serenades have their own particular charm, while the V*ariations on a Theme by Haydn*—in fact the *St Anthony Chorale*, used by that composer—enjoy enormous popularity, as they illustrate a form of which Brahms had complete mastery. A pair of overtures—the *Academic Festival Overture* and the *Tragic Overture*—and arrangements of his *Hungarian Dances* completes the body of orchestral music without a solo instrument.

CONCERTOS (Tracks 13-16)
Brahms's concertos consist of two magnificent and demanding piano concertos, a Violin Concerto and a splendid Double Concerto for violin and cello. The piano concertos are fairly traditional in form (though the second has four movements, rather than three), but they both showcase Brahms's contrapuntal skill and imaginative development of ideas.

CHAMBER MUSIC (Tracks 17-35)
Like the symphony, chamber music (and especially the quartet) was seen as a test of the composer's skill. Brahms completed some two dozen pieces of chamber music for a variety of instruments, including trios, quartets, quintets, sextets and sonatas for violin, cello and clarinet; almost all of these have retained a prominent place in the repertory.

CHORAL MUSIC (Tracks 36-38)
Major choral works by Brahms include the monumental *A German Requiem*, a setting of biblical texts for soloists, chorus and orchestra, the beautiful *Alto Rhapsody*, with a text derived from Goethe, the *Schicksalslied* ('Song of Destiny') and a series of accompanied and unaccompanied choral works, written for the choral groups with which he was concerned in Hamburg and in Vienna.

VOCAL MUSIC (Track 39)
Brahms's 213 songs were important additions to the repertoire of the German *Lied* (art song). The *Liebeslieder Waltzes* for vocal quartet and piano duet are particularly delightful, while the solo songs include the moving *Four Serious Songs*, reflecting preoccupations as his life drew to a close.

PIANO MUSIC (Tracks 40-51)
If all the chamber music of Brahms should be heard, the same may be said of his music for piano. Brahms showed a particular talent for the composition of variations, and this is aptly demonstrated in the famous *Variations on a Theme by Handel*. The three piano sonatas, relatively early works, are less well known than the later piano pieces. He wrote a number of ballades, fantasias and other short pieces, as well as music for four hands.

Text by Keith Anderson, David McCleery, David Patmore and Caroline Waight